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UNITED STATES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR, HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES, EDUCATION  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LEGISLATIVE BRANCH  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE DEPARTMENT  
AND FOREIGN OPERATIONS  
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET  
SENIOR DEMOCRATIC WHIP  
CONGRESSIONAL GLOBAL  
HEALTH CAUCUS, CO-FOUNDER

October 16, 2009

Secretary Arne Duncan  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Secretary Ken Salazar  
U.S. Department of Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Duncan and Secretary Salazar:

As a member of the House of Representatives Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee, a member of the House Native American Caucus, a former educator, and the representative of American Indians in the 4th district of Minnesota, I am writing to express my deepest support for the work both of you do to educate our nation's children. I especially want to encourage a greater partnership and collaboration between the Departments of Education and Interior on the education of American Indian and Alaska Native children. I believe with stronger interdepartmental cooperation we can provide our children with an education that honors their Native identities and prepares them for successful futures by giving them opportunities to incorporate their rich cultural heritages, languages, and traditions into the curriculum.

As you may know, there are approximately 624,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in the public K-12 system funded by the Department of Education (DOE) and federally and tribally operated schools that serve Native students through the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) within the Department of the Interior (DOI). The vast majority of Native students attend public schools (approximately 90%). The federally supported Indian education system includes 48,000 elementary and secondary students (approximately 7%), along with 29 tribal colleges, universities and post-secondary schools. Unfortunately, for the 2005-2006 school year, the national graduation rate for Native students was 50.0%, compared to 76.1% for white students.

DOE statistics indicate student performance at BIE schools is lower than the performance of Native students attending public schools. For the 2005-2006 school year, 69% of BIE schools failed to make the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, compared to 29% of all U.S. schools in the 2006-2007 school year. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Secretary of Interior sets the definition of AYP for BIE schools. Currently, a BIE school must meet the AYP goals as of the state in which the school is located, but the tribe or BIE school board may seek an alternative AYP definition via a waiver from DOI.

For the future success of our Native students, we must consider the unique needs and circumstances of BIE and tribally operated schools, which may not fit under the respective state's definition of AYP. I encourage both DOE and DOI to assist tribes and schools who seek waivers for tribal appropriate definitions of AYP and to expedite the approval process. At this time, tribes and schools have submitted only three waiver applications, yet none have been granted.

DOE funds the education of Native students by operating Native American-targeted programs and by setting aside funds within programs open to all students and transferring these funds to the BIA for BIE managed schools. Often, that is where the interaction between the two Departments ends. A more productive and communicative relationship between the two agencies would ensure Native students meet their academic potential with educational programs that consider their cultures, languages, backgrounds, and identities. Given the relative under-performance of Native student academic achievement, your Departments must commit to work together on the issues of accountability, high standards, data collection, and teacher support and distribution for the sake of our Native children and their futures.

The essential first step towards greater coordination is stable leadership at the agencies with primary responsibility for Native students. Without consistent, qualified, permanent leadership in OIE and BIE, the needs of our nation's Native students will not be sufficiently represented within either of your agencies. This is evidenced by the lack of funding tribes and BIE schools are able to directly access under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, despite the high demonstrated need in tribal communities. Considering the number of Native students served by your Departments, the low graduation rate, and unique educational needs of Native students, it is of great importance that the positions of Director of the Office of Indian Education (OIE) in the Department of Education and the Director of BIE in the Department of Interior be filled in a permanent manner as soon as possible. We need these directors in place so they can advocate for our Native students and fight the resources needed to make Native students more successful.

After leadership is established, it is necessary to require formal structure for collaboration between agency officials responsible for Indian Education, building a foundation for future administrations. My understanding is the current cooperation between agencies is variable, based only on transient personalities and sympathies. I encourage both Departments to put systems in place so the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students does not fluctuate with administration changes. Native students and their needs cannot afford to become invisible within either Department.

Additionally, I urge Secretary Duncan to work with the National Advisory Council on Indian Education (NACIE), established in Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to advise you directly on funding and administration issues, including making recommendations for the Director of OIE position.

Thank you in advance for working together to meet the needs of Native students and to promptly fill the vacancies of the Director positions at the Office of Indian Education and Bureau of Indian Education. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (202) 225-6631.

Sincerely,



Betty McCollum  
Member of Congress